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## THE BOY POET SULPICIUS—A TRAGEDY OF ROMAN EDUCATION.<sup>1</sup>

EARLY in the year 1871 excavations at the Porta Salaria in Rome brought to light a monument of more than usual significance to those interested in the educational problems of antiquity. The commemorative inscription found near by declared it the tomb of Quintus Sulpicius Maximus, a lad of eleven years, five months, and twelve days, who in 94 A. D. acquitted himself with credit in the third of the quinquennial contests instituted by Domitian in honor of Jupiter Capitolinus. This tomb, facing originally on the Via Salaria not far from the Colline Gate of Servius Tullius, had been built into the Aurelian Wall, restored in the early part of the fifth century by Arcadius and Honorius. The statue and the inscription from this tomb, which form the subject of this paper, are to be found in an upper room of the Capitoline Museum, where the boy prodigy holds out his scroll appealingly to an unappreciative audience of odds and ends that rarely attract the casual visitor.

The marble slab measures 45 inches in height, 34 inches in width, and 27 inches in thickness. The figure of the young poet, 28 inches in height, stands in a niche covered by a gable with a laurel crown in the tympanum, and with acanthus and other leaves in the antifixes. The entire front at the right and left of this niche are closely inscribed with forty Greek hexameters of the poem, the last three being with difficulty deciphered from the scroll in the hands of the boy. The space below the niche contains first a dedication in Latin extending from cornice to cornice, and under this, in two columns, two Greek epigrams written probably by the father. The Latin inscription is in the symmetrical, clear capitals of the early empire, the height varying from three-quarters of an inch in the dedication formula, D. M., to half an inch in the fourth and fifth lines. It reads:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Read at the Classical Conference at Ann Arbor, Mich., March 27; see p. 406.

<sup>2</sup> The text of the inscriptions is given by HENZEN, *Bull. dell' Inst.*, 1871, pp. 98-117; KAIBEL, *Inscriptiones Graecae Siciliae et Italiae*, pp. 494-6; cf. also KAIBEL,

Sacred to the Deified Shades of the Dead.

In memory of Quintus Sulpicius Maximus, the son of Quintus, of the Claudian tribe. His home was at Rome. He lived eleven years, five months, and twelve days. In the third lustrum of the contest, entering the competition as one among fifty-two Greek poets, he roused to admiration by his talent the favor he had won by his tender years, and came off with distinction. That his parents may not seem to have been unduly influenced by their affection for him, his extemporaneous verses have been inscribed below. Quintus Sulpicius Eugramus and Licinia Januaria, his unfortunate parents, erected this tomb for their devoted son, for themselves, and for their descendants.

The Greek epigrams are in two columns, that on the left being about 16 inches wide, that on the right less than 13 inches; the average height of the letters is about half an inch. They are closely connected in thought; literally translated they read:

Though but a lad of twelve short years was I,  
I left this contest for the land of shades.

Disease and weariness reft me away,  
For of the Muses dreamed I, morning, noon, and night.

I pray you for the sake of this poor lad,  
Pause here and see his off-hand verses' dainty grace.

And speak through falling tears, with gracious lips  
This single prayer, "Fare thou to Elysian land."

For thou hast left here living nightingales,  
Which greedy-handed Pluto ne'er shall seize.

How slight this token of our love; and yet thy fame to heaven shall come,  
Oh, Maximus, by thee the Pierian Muses have been far outdone.

Nor nameless didst thou bow to ruthless fate,  
Which gave thy song no lethal lot.

No one with tearless eyes thy tomb shall pass,  
Beholding here thy verses, row on row.

Thy glory is secure, for not unknown  
Shalt thou repose, gazed on by humbler shades.

The title of the extempore verse of the young Sulpicius is in letters about half an inch high; the body of the poem is cut in smaller letters which were much crowded in the right-hand col-

*Epigrammata Graeca ex lapidibus conlecta*, pp. 250-53. The monument of Sulpicius is reproduced by LANCIANI in *Pagan and Christian Rome* (full-page illustration, facing p. 282).

umn in order to get the whole poem into the available space. A translation follows:

THE EXTEMPORANEOUS VERSES OF QUINTUS SULPICIUS MAXIMUS: THE WORDS GREAT ZEUS MIGHT HAVE USED, UPBRAIDING HELIOS BECAUSE HE GAVE HIS CAR TO PHAËTHON.

The light-bearing charioteer of our well-ordered world,  
Thee alone did the gods, lords of heaven, appoint.  
Why then, pray, thy heedless son bring to the vault of Olympus,  
And thy charger's ineffable swiftness surrender to him,  
Not even in secret afraid of my power?  
False to the gods this folly of thine. Now whither away  
Fled young Phaëthon's car? Thy torch's unquenchable fire,  
Why up to my throne did it flare? why through the wide world  
And the circling stars swept thy stifling heat?  
Old Ocean raised his suppliant hands to heaven,  
What stream lamented not its dwindling course?  
The harvests on the fruitful ground lay sear,  
And every swain leaned on his scythe and mourned his parching sheaves,  
In vain he sowed the ungracious soil; in vain  
He yoked his oxen to his crooked plow. Till evening star  
Behind his weary oxen, bent his manly limbs.  
All lands made moan for him, that heedless boy,  
And I at last did quench his glowing flame.

Weep not the lad's dire fate, but for thy world take thought  
Lest thou shouldst find the flaming weapon from my hand too fierce for thee.  
Mark well the mind of heaven-dwelling Zeus.  
By Rhea's self, Olympus never saw a madder prank;  
My world, thy trust, no schoolboy's task, to rule!  
Let be the past; the future guard with greater care.  
Unworthy of his sire, thy son. He wot not of thy chargers' boundless strength,  
Nor had he skill to guide the reins, thy task stupendous.

Come now, return to earth again, lest unto other hands be given  
Thy vaunted task, the fleeting pleasures of thy toilsome round.  
Thou only, hastening on with flaming wheels,  
All that fair way from East to West didst pass.  
To thee this trust I gave, thy ceaseless vaunt.  
Take pity on the earth and all the star-bright world,  
And through Olympus hold thy way again.  
Such tasks are god-befitting, such our rightful sphere.  
Thy gracious light again, oh, god, take up.—Thy son hath ravaged wide.—  
And do thou then thyself the vault illimitable traverse,

Half way 'twixt heaven above and earth beneath.  
 For thus thy fires will light the sons of Uranus,  
 And mortal prayers be ever free from plaint.  
 Thus shalt thou find the heart of Zeus o'ersoft to pardon thee.  
 But if some other purpose hold thee, reckless one,  
 The stars themselves be witness, that my flaming bolt  
 With swift-winged power shall utterly destroy alike the bodies of thy steeds  
 and of thy son.

It is quite outside the province of this paper to comment upon the literary merit of these verses. They will, of course, never be reckoned with as a part of the world's literature. But as the swan song of this ambitious Roman boy, they have a peculiar pathos that haunts the imagination. We are touched, too, in the dedication, by the note of parental pride mingling with the grief, which has outlived the centuries and makes real to us the sorrow of Sulpicius Eugramus and Licinia Januaria.

But aside from the sentiment that clings to it, the entire incident has a distinct value for the student of ancient life. It is possible to explain the effort of this talented boy upon reasonable grounds. He was the logical product of a system of training, reinforced probably by an unusual inheritance and environment which forced him to an untimely fruition. Although an investigation of such limited sources as we have at hand will clearly yield results less satisfactory and conclusive than we might wish, the attempt to reconstruct the inheritance, environment, and training of young Sulpicius will illustrate the pedagogical ideals and educational methods of the Early Empire.

The father of the youthful poet was probably a freedman; for while the son bore a Roman cognomen, Maximus, and is further distinguished by the designation of his tribe (the Claudian), the mark of a freeborn Roman, Eugramus has neither. The latter had apparently belonged to some Q. Sulpicius whose prænomen and nomen, according to the Roman custom, he had taken, after his manumission, in addition to his own slave name.

It might at first seem a hopeless task, considering the extent of this gens, even to conjecture with which particular Q. Sulpicius our Eugramus had been connected. In the *Prosopographia Imperii Romani* (Vol. III, pp. 281-90) appear forty-one men of

this name. In the *Corpus of Latin Inscriptions* (Vol. VI, 4, 1, 26944-27018) are given seventy-four epitaphs from tombs of the Sulpician gens and of its freedmen. The prænomen Quintus, however, was unusual among the Sulpicii, Gaius and Servius being more common. In the sixth volume of the *Corpus* it appears in only three inscriptions, all apparently epitaphs of freedmen (C. I. L. VI, 4, 26949, 26968, 26969). In the *Prosopographia* there are also but three. This reduces the difficulty of identification somewhat, for a study of our available sources indicates that the name Quintus was common only in the Camerini family. It is possible, therefore, that the former master of Q. Sulpicius Eugramus was a Q. Sulpicius Camerinus.

Perhaps this identification is sufficient for our purpose, if it connects Eugramus with a family mentioned by Juvenal, who wrote about this same time (*Sat.* VII, 90; VIII, 38), as typical of the nobility, having a record not only for distinguished service, but for refined literary interests, counting among its members an ambassador to Greece in the investigation of Greek codes preliminary to the decemvirate of 451 B. C., and an epic poet mentioned by Ovid as a contemporary. The most distinguished of the Sulpicii Camerini died only fifteen years before the birth of the young poet. This was Sulpicius Camerinus, called either Pythicus or, as Mommsen conjectures, Peticus, from a distinguished ancestor, Gaius Sulpicius Peticus, dictator in 396 B. C., and five times consul. He was the son of the epic poet already mentioned; consul in 46, proconsul in Africa in 56, a member of the exclusively patrician society of the Arval Brothers, being in 60 president of the Board of Sacrifice. In 67 he and his son were put to death on a charge of treason, because they had ventured to use this hereditary cognomen Pythicus, which Nero claimed as his sole right. Since evidence is not lacking that Eugramus had in 94 been free for a considerable time, the interval of twenty-seven years between the death of Peticus and that of young Maximus offers no serious objection to the supposition that Eugramus was possibly the freedman of Q. Sulpicius Camerinus Peticus.

His nationality could hardly be proved conclusively by the fact that as a slave he had borne a Greek name, for it is not impos-

sible that such names were applied indiscriminately, according to the master's fancy, to slaves of all races. But the direct statement that his son was one among fifty-two Greek poets may indicate that Eugramus was himself a Greek.

At the time of his son's death in 94, Eugramus was evidently a man of considerable means; the fact is attested by the rather elaborate character of the tomb and its location on the *Via Salaria*, the burial place of well-to-do families. If his master was indeed Sulpicius Camerinus Peticus, the wealth could not have come to Eugramus from him, since his property was undoubtedly divided between the state and the informer M. Aquilius Regulus. We must suppose, therefore, that it was obtained from some other source.

What his occupation was, it is impossible to determine. Since we find no mention of him in any literary or epigraphical document, we have no evidence connecting him with any political office or position of court favor. Could we but be sure that he was the author of the epigrams, we should have a reasonable clue. A comparison of these epigrams with the Latin inscription shows striking points of similarity. There is in both the same mingling of grief and pride, the same emphasis of the boy's youth, the same reason given for displaying his verse as a vindication of parental pride and as an appeal for universal sympathy—resemblances that suggest a common author.

The epigrams show a finish and mastery of form that marks them as the work of a Greek, and since Eugramus was quite possibly a Greek and in all probability wrote the dedication, it may well be that he also wrote the epigrams. If we can upon such shadowy evidence admit at least the probability of this supposition, we shall naturally suppose him to have belonged to the large class of Greek grammarians and rhetoricians so common in this period. His slave name, Eugramus, and his probable connection with the Camerini, noted for their literary interests, may imply that as a slave he had been employed as a tutor or as a rhetorician in his master's family.

These hypotheses are significant only so far as they furnish a possible explanation of the boy's precocity. If Eugramus was

a Greek freedman with years of experience as a grammarian or a rhetorician, first as the slave of a cultured house and later perhaps as an independent teacher of the art, the son's literary taste, ambition, and in a degree his talent may have been part of his inheritance. Moreover, his home language would in that case have been Greek, and he would have heard the limited stock of rhetorical commonplaces treated over and over by his father's pupils, till the catch-phrases and hackneyed vocabulary would become almost unconsciously his own.

But while these hypotheses might in a measure account for the character of the boy's precocity, they do not explain the peculiar way in which it was manifested. The mere fact that in this competition, Sulpicius was but one among fifty-two contestants, may serve to indicate how common this form of extemporizing was in the classical period. It is evident, therefore, that the system of training employed is an important element in the problem, and our evidence is here fortunately sufficient to warrant somewhat more definite conclusions.

Aside from our literary evidence, even of a direct character, like the *Institutes* of Quintilian, we have for consideration in this poem a document which has the unimpeachable value of epigraphical testimony. These verses have been practically unaffected in transmission. We look today upon the very letters which the proud father had carved beside the figure of his son. We have no haunting specter of textual criticism to lay, before we can approximate the original.

Moreover, this poem is not an isolated phenomenon. Its relations involve the whole complex system of ancient thought; its ramifications strike deep into the history of ancient literature, art, and education. Like the "flower in the crannied wall," it has little individual significance, but as the product of an organism, it bears marks of its origin. If we could but understand it thoroughly in all its relations, we should better comprehend the entire system of rhetorical training under the Roman empire. Before examining the literary evidence, therefore, we may seek at first hand in the poem itself for traces of the ideal and the more obvious features of the system that produced it.



The most superficial examination stamps the poem as abnormal. Content and form have their normal relation neither to each other nor to the personality of the poet. The legitimate function of form is to give adequate expression to content. Any attempt to give it artificial value, aside from the satisfactory performance of this function, results in an effect of sham. In proportion as this balance is destroyed, the work of art falls in the scale of values. It is evident that in the poem under consideration the content furnishes a mere excuse for displaying a mastery of form, which has become practically the sole consideration. We have here an example of the Alexandrine school in its dotage—the fatal substitution of the mechanical for the organic.

In the second place, the content of a work of art, if not wholly the product of the creative imagination, is normally so molded and affected by it as to bear unmistakable traces of the artist's personality. The fact that Ovid, seventy-five years before, and Lucian, seventy-five years after, treated the same theme along practically the same lines, indicates clearly enough that the young Sulpicius was presenting here a conventional commonplace. The picture was given to him complete in all its details, and he was not stimulated to develop it in any way by the creative imagination.

Moreover, as we shall have occasion to note in another connection, the form does not result from a spontaneous attempt to express a conception in adequate terms, but in a conscious effort to recall and fit together conventional rhetorical phrases, associated more or less mechanically with the theme.

We are perhaps safe in summarizing as follows the general aim of the rhetorical system in vogue at the end of the first century:

1. It exalted form to independent importance.
2. It aimed at a system of rhetorical mechanics.
3. It substituted memory, the most mechanical of the mental processes, for the creative imagination.
4. Its ideal was conformity to tradition and convention rather than stimulation to original effort.

These conditions are enforced by a more detailed examination of the poem of Sulpicius. We find the vocabulary remarkably varied and complete, two words, at least so far as extant Greek goes, being apparently found only here. In the case of a boy of twelve years, it is clear that so great a command of literary words and striking epithets must have been the result of his training. A study of his sources in this particular will, therefore, suggest the authors upon which this training was based; the limits of this paper preclude more than the briefest possible summary.

1. Of the 28 epithets in the poem, 15 are distinctly Homeric, 4 are found in Homer but also in other authors, 4 remain unclassified, and only 7 are not Homeric, traceable to other sources.

2. Of the 55 substantives, 25 are distinctly Homeric, 14 are found in Homer and also in other authors, 4 remain unclassified, and only 12 are not Homeric.

3. The colorless character of the verbs, in contrast to the striking epithets and substantives, is significant of the florid style. Only 10 of the 45 verbs deserve any special notice. Of these 4 are Homeric, 2 are found in Homer and elsewhere, 2 are unclassified, and 2 are not Homeric.

4. Of the 3 words not included in the classes mentioned, 2 are not Homeric.

Thus we see that of the 96 words studied 68, or two-thirds of the entire number, are Homeric. Of the non-Homeric words, 11 are common in Herodotus, 9 in Hesiod, 7 in Pindar, 7 in Euripides, 5 in Xenophon, 5 in Apollonius Rhodius, 3 in Sophocles, 2 in Æschylus.

The natural conclusions from these data would be, first, that the boy's training had included an intensive drill in Homer. This conclusion is further supported by the fact that the forms are regularly Homeric, no matter what the source from which the word was derived. Moreover, Homeric words are employed with an intimate knowledge of this usage. To illustrate with a single example, the form *βόεσαι* appears in Homer with one exception at the end of the line, as it does in the sixteenth line of our poem. In the second place, we see that the drill in

Homer was apparently supplemented by the study of Hesiod, Pindar, Euripides, Apollonius Rhodius, and perhaps also of Herodotus and Xenophon. Now, while it is conceivable that a twelve-year-old boy may have read his Homer repeatedly, it seems evident that he could not also have read Herodotus, Hesiod, Pindar, Euripides, Xenophon, Apollonius Rhodius, Sophocles, and Æschylus with enough intensity to have had an appreciable effect upon his memory. They must have been presented to him either in judicious selections by his teacher, or striking phrases, possibly whole lines, were given him as supplemental to his Homer. That this was actually the kind of training that the boy received is made probable by the statement of Quintilian (I, viii), which is worth quoting :

It is extremely proper that they begin with reading Homer and Virgil. Tragedies are useful, and lyric poets, too ; provided you not only select your authors, but the passages in the several authors.

This kind of training was entirely consistent with the ideals and methods of the period. In support of our contention it is only necessary to refer to other passages of Quintilian, who, though he intended his work primarily for aspiring orators, has outlined in a very definite fashion a system of elementary training of far wider application. Thus, in his view, the ideals in the primary education, as in the boy's later study, were memory and imitation. He says (I, iii, 1) : "The most important indication of natural ability in children is memory. . . . The next important is imitation ;" and farther on (I, i, 36) :

For memory, as I shall show in the proper place, is especially important for the orator ; and it is especially strengthened and nourished by exercise ; in the age of which we are now speaking, which can create nothing of itself, it is almost the only faculty which can be improved by the care of a teacher.

The system embodying this ideal was in brief as follows : Primary education began with a tutor from the child's third to his seventh year, and consisted largely in reading and writing (Quint., I, i, 15). Secondary education under a *grammaticus*, or instructor in the elementary classics, followed as soon as the boy could read and write. The two main branches of this training consisted in a study of the Greek and Latin poets, and

in elementary composition, both oral and written, based on this study (Quint., I, ix). Homer and Virgil are recommended as the proper authors with which the boy's serious reading should begin, and as a basis for all subsequent study. These are supplemented by judicious selections from the tragedies and lyrics. The Latin authors specially mentioned are Ennius, Accius, Pacuvius, Lucilius, Terence and Caecilius.

The method of study applied to these poets consisted (Quint., I, iv, v), in parsing and construing the words; in a study of versification; in a study of style with particular reference to poetic license; in a study of synonyms, archaisms, and in the acquisition of a choice vocabulary of such words; in a practical mastery of figures of speech and all rhetorical ornament; in a study of structure and disposition; in a mastery of historical detail; and, finally, in the memorizing of choice passages.

The oral and written composition, based upon this intensive reading and carried along at the same time with it, consisted of exercises in both prose and verse. The prose exercises were at first the simple narration of familiar tales, Æsop being especially recommended, followed by an elaboration of these simple narratives by various rhetorical devices (Quint. I, ix, 1). In poetry the verses were analyzed and explained in the pupils' own words, and were then paraphrased (I, ix). A single quotation will show how implicitly Quintilian believed in the efficacy of this system, and will at the same time throw light on the study of our poem (Quint., II, vii, 2, 3):

If boys are early accustomed to compose after the best models, they will always have in their memories something which they may imitate and, without even realizing it, will reproduce that sort of style which has made the deepest impression upon them. They will never be at a loss for plenty of the best words, phrases, and figures, which they need not hunt for, since these will offer themselves spontaneously as from a magazine treasured up in their minds.

The subject of extemporaneous poetical composition in antiquity is too extensive to be discussed here. In the case of our poem, the process of composition seems to have consisted in a more or less mechanical fitting together, to meet the require-

ments of the hexameter verse, of words and phrases recalled from an intensive drill in Homer and other Greek poets.

The character of the evidence does not permit us to draw from our study a fuller knowledge of the lad Sulpicius. After all, the real value of his poem for us lies not in the interesting half glimpse it gives into the heart of ancient education, but in the pathos that humanizes it and lifts it above all accidental associations of time or place. The ambitious parents, proud even in their grief, the brilliant child, poring over his Homer night and day that he might win in the imperial contest, and dying at last from the unnatural strain, in the disappointment of defeat, give us for the moment a sense of intimate kinship with Roman life, of sympathy for those living eighteen centuries ago like that which we feel for those about us.

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